

Review of Prof. Geoffrey Zylstra's talk entitled *HIT, KICKED, AND EJECTED: HOW BLACK WOMEN RISKED THEIR SAFETY AND LEVERAGED THEIR FEMININITY TO RACIALLY DESEGREGATE PHILADELPHIA'S STREETCARS, 1859–1867*

By Prof. Zheng Zhu, Humanities.

On November 25th, Prof. Geoffrey Zylstra gave a talk that critically examined the complex and contested situation of racial segregation in Philadelphia, with a specific focus on the way the streetcar system was created and politicized to draw racial boundaries.

Prof. Zylstra began his presentation with an extensive and very in-depth reflection on the history of streetcars. Widely seen and recognized as a symbol of modernization, streetcars were first introduced to the public during the early to mid-19th century. Black passengers were prohibited from riding inside the car, which was a white only space at the time.

According to Prof. Zylstra's further explanations, the fights against the segregation in the streetcars and the larger system of racism have been well documented by the historians and legal scholars. Black women played a key and significant role in this battle. For example, some of the well-known cases, such as *The Robinson's* and *Derry v. Lowry* lawsuits, were all evidence of black women using their voice, image, mind, resilience, and perseverance to criticize and end the blatant discriminatory treatments supported and normalized by the racial hierarchy.

Prof. Zylstra emphasized two concepts central to his research; one was "leveraging her ambiguous racial appearance," which demonstrated the strategic articulation of *skin tone* to reveal and challenge the dominant construction of whiteness. The other was "filth theory" in the context of racial rhetoric that was manipulated to stigmatize blackness in a white-dominated sphere.

The successful filing and winning of these lawsuits paved the way for the later civil rights movement. Prof. Zylstra called our attention to the current debate on immigration, which should also be analyzed through a critical lens that intersects racial politics, gender identities, cultural and physical boundaries, and shifting forms of discrimination.

Prof. Zylstra's talk was moving, powerful, and inspiring in a sense that it sheds light on the importance of uncovering historical facts that have cast a monumental impact on the existing social system and political situation. Most importantly, it pushes us to keep fighting for justice and equality!